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ABSTRACT

This paper considers a distinction frequently used in sociolinguistics and ethnography of speaking to describe speech events: their formality or informality. Three principle meanings of "formality" found in the literature concern whether the formality relates to properties of a communicative code, properties of the social setting in which a code is used, or properties of the analyst's description. Four aspects of formality that apply cross-culturally are: (1) increased structuring of speech; (2) consistency in terms of the social significance of variants chosen at different levels of communicative expression; (3) invoking of positional identities of participants; and (4) emergence of a focus in speech interactions. The role of these variables in cross-cultural comparison and a comparison of certain speech events among the Wolof and Mursi are discussed. All societies seem to make distinctions among speech events according to the four aspects of formality. Comparisons within a society and between societies can be made according to how they connect the various aspects of formality and what concomitant effects formalizing a speech event will have. Formality, in this view, is largely a process of focusing, which can operate along various dimensions. (SW)

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Formality and Informality in Speech Events

by

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RELEVANCE TO EDUCATIONAL PRACTICE

Irvine's paper considers a distinction frequently used in sociolinguistics and ethnography of speaking to describe speech events: their formality or informality. The author argues that formality and informality represent not poles on a one-dimensional continuum, but a complex of interrelated factors concerning many facets of a speech event. Four aspects of "formality" can be tentatively distinguished, which seem to apply to all societies--that is, all societies seem to make distinctions among speech events according to these criteria, and to have speech events that are behaviorally more formal and less formal in these various senses of the term. These aspects of "formality" provide a possible framework for comparing speech events within a society and in addition, societies can be usefully compared with each other according to how they connect the various aspects of formality and what concomitant effects formalizing a speech event will have. Educators should be aware of these aspects of speaking, especially as they may exist in classroom conditions where children speak more than one language, or are dominant in a language other than that of the majority culture.

FORMALITY AND INFORMALITY IN SPEECH EVENTS

Judith T. Irvine

0. Introduction: Statement of problem

This paper considers a distinction frequently used in sociolinguistics and the ethnography of speaking to describe speech events: their formality or informality. What might one mean by "formality," in terms of observable characteristics of speech events? Are we dealing with a dichotomy, as the contrast formality/informality might suggest, or a continuum ranging between two poles, or something more complex? Can whatever distinctions we eventually decide are involved in formality/informality be applied to every society? Will the same kinds of behavorial differences, or the same kinds of cultural categories, emerge everywhere?

I pose these questions in an attempt to further the development of a more precise analytical vocabulary for the ethnography of communication. We now have a small number of case-history descriptions of ways of speaking in particular speech communities. But the terms in which those descriptions are made often remain vague, lacking in explicit analytical content, too close perhaps to our own folk categories -- inadequate for cross-cultural comparison, or even for description itself. Many of us (I include myself here) have used terms like "formality" without defining them or thinking about their definition, simply assuming that we all know what is meant by them, when in fact our usages are vague and quite variable.

My object, then, is to give our usages more substance, and to explore how they might then better serve cross-cultural comparison. I shall first consider what has been meant by "formality" and "informality" in the recent literature -- that is, what various authors seem to have intended these terms

to describe. I shall then restate these various senses of "formality" in what I hope is a more explicit fashion, and argue for the usefulness of the more detailed formulation for comparison, both within and between speech communities. A comparison of certain speech events among the Wolof and the Mursi will provide a more extended example.

1. What has been meant by "formality" in the literature

A look at some recent literature in sociolinguistics, the ethnography of speaking, and related fields (e.g., Gumperz and Hymes 1972; Bauman and Sherzer 1974; Sanches and Blount 1975; Fishman 1968; Bloch 1975; Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1976; papers in Language in Society; Working Papers in Sociolinguistics) suggests three principal senses of "formality," which are potentially confused with each other. These different senses have to do with whether the formality concerns properties of a communicative code, properties of the social setting in which a code is used, or properties of the analyst's description.

For instance, many authors use "formality" in the sense of an increased structuring and predictability of discourse. Here formality is an aspect of code, such that the discourse is subject to extra rules, or some greater elaboration of rules. In this vein, for example, Bricker (1974:388) and Gossen (1974:412), both writing on the Maya, and Fox (1974:388) on the Rotinese, all describe "formal speech" as marked by special structuring -- notably redundacy, and syntactic or semantic parallelism. Others have emphasized the predictability of structured discourse; they have argued that a "formal style" reduces the variablity and spontaniety of speech (see Joos 1959 and Wolfson 1976). For example, Rubin's (1968) paper on bilingualism in Paraguay discusses formality in terms of limitations on the kinds of behaviors that are acceptable, and on the amount of allowable variation

(conceived as deviation from a norm).

Other authors use "formality/informality" as a way of describing characteristics of a social situation, not necessarily the kind of code used in that situation. The relevant characteristics of the situation may have something to do with a prevailing affective tone, so that a "formal" situation requires a display of seriousness, politeness, and respect. For instance, Fischer (1972), describing ways of speaking among Trukese and Ponapeans, discusses the use of "respect vocabulary" and "formal etiquette" as displays of politeness marking a formal situation. In Fishman's (1972:51) discussion of "lecturelike or formal situations," formality seems to be conceived of as the opposite of levity and intimacy. Ervin-Tripp (1972:235), too, relates formality to politeness and "the seriousness of such situations." Not all authors agree on just what formality means about a situation, however. Rubin (1968) lists "formality" as a situational variable separate from "degree of intimacy" and "degree of seriousness."

Finally, many authors use "formal" to refer to a technical mode of description, the analyst's statement of the rules governing discourse.

These three senses of "formality" have often been merged or interrelated. For example, when formality is conceived as an aspect of social situations, it is common to extend the term to the linguistic varieties used in such situations, regardless of what those varieties happen to be like otherwise. "Formal" and "informal" pronouns are a case in point. Their "formality" lies in what they connote about a social setting in which they are appropriately used; they do not necessarily differ in the number or elaboration of syntactic (or other) rules governing their use.

More interestingly, Maurice Bloch (1975) has recently argued that code

structuring and situational formality are casually related, so that increased structuring of discourse necessarily brings about increased politeness and a greater display of respect for a traditional, normative social order (and perhaps a political establishment). Some views go further, blending all three senses of formality together, and arguing that formal descriptions are most suitable (or only suitable) for the more structured discourse that occurs in ceremonial-like "formal" situations. Here, one wonders whether it is not just the use of the single term "formal" for a kind of description, a kind of discourse, and a kind of situation that makes the three appear necessarily related. Discourse that is spontaneous, that has never occurred before, is still rule-governed, as linguists concerned with syntax have been at pains to point out. So with Halliday (1964) I would seek to avoid confusing the technical sense of formality (of the analyst's description) with empirical senses, which will be the subject of the rest of this paper. I shall return to Bloch's argument later, however.

2. Four aspects of "formality" that apply cross-culturally

Leaving aside for the time being questions of causal relationship, let me new restate, in a more detailed way, what considerations we might have in mind when describing speech events as formal or informal. A search of available empirical evidence, scanty as it is -- and filtered as it is through ethnographers' descriptive vocabularies -- suggests that the discourse aspect and the situational aspect of formality should be broken down into finer distinctions. Four different aspects of "formality" emerge which seem to apply to a wide variety of speech communities, perhaps to all. The four kinds of formality often co-occur in the same speech event, but not always (hence, their presentation as separate variables).

2.1 (concerning code) Increased structuring and predictability. Here one should distinguish among the various levels of linguistic organization that may be subject to the additional or elaborated structuring, such as intonation (including pitch contour, meter, loudness, and speed of talk), phonology, syntax, the use of particular sets of lexical items, fixed-text sequences, and turn-taking. Increased structuring need not affect all of these aspects of linguistic organization equally or at the same time. Some speech events formalize different parts of the linguistic system, and so cannot be lined up on a simple continuum from informality to formality.

For instance, among the Wolof[1] there are two distinct speech events, woy ("praise singing") and xaxaar (insult sessions), which differ from ordinary conversation in their structuring of intonational patterns (among other things). But different aspects of intonation are affected. In praise singing, the pitch contour of utterances is more structured than in ordinary talk, but meter remains relatively loose; in insult sessions, meter is strictly regulated (with drum accompaniment), while pitch remains loose. It would be impossible to say that one form of discourse was more formalized than the other, although one could say that both are more formalized than ordinary conversation (and less formalized than some types of religious singing which structure both pitch and rhythm).

Similarly, among the Yoruba two speech events, both associated with the Iwi Egungun cult celebrations, formalize different aspects of the discourse (Davis 1976). In one event speakers use highly structured utterances; often fixed texts, on conventional topics; but turn-taking among speakers is unpredictable. Much of the interest for the audience lies in speakers' competition for the floor. In the other type of speech event, turn-taking is quite strictly regulated (as though in a play), but topics can be creative

and novel. The formalization of discourse here cannot be thought of as just a progressive rigidifying and restriction on creative potential, but rather involves a focusing of creativity onto a certain aspect of talk, which is highlighted because other aspects are predictable and redundant.

2.2. (concerning code) Consistency, in terms of the social significance of variants chosen at different levels of communicative expression. This aspect of formalization involves co-occurrence rules. Whereas in ordinary conversation speakers may be able to recombine variants to achieve special effects, these inconsistencies seem to be less likely in the kinds of discourse ethnographers have labeled more formal.

For example, among the Wolof differences of pitch, loudness, and speed of talk (as well as other discourse features) may each connote something about the speaker's social rank: high pitch, high volume, and high speed all suggest low social rank, while low pitch, low volume, and a laconic slowness suggest high social rank. Sometimes a speaker can mix choices (e.g., high pitch + low volume + low speed seems to indicate baby talk, used by adults to address infants, for some other mixes and their use, see Irvine 1974); but in some kinds of discourse -- which I would call the more "formal" -- choices for each discourse feature are consistent in their social connotation.

Another example comes from Friedrich's (1972) paper on Russian pronouns. Friedrich notes that pronoun usage can be consistent or inconsistent with facial expressions. More formal situations are characterized by greater consistency -- as opposed to "ironic" uses which combine the V pronoun with a contemptuous expression ("paralinguistic ty"), or vice versa, the T pronoun with paralinguistic V. Similarly, Jackson (1974:63) indicates that among the Vaupés Indians, "language-mixing" -- e.g., use of Tuyuka words in a

conversation that is syntactically Bará (and Bará in the rest of the lexicon) -- is likely to occur only in informal discourse. In "more formal" settings, co-occurrence rules are more strict, so that the social connotations of lexicon and syntax are consistent (connotations of longhouse and descent-unit identity).

Because many authors describe co-occurrence violations with terms like "irony," "levity," "humor," or "local color," it appears that some of what is meant by the "seriousness" of formal situations is actually a matter of consistency and adherence to a set of co-occurrence rules that apply to these situations and not to others. As Ervin-Tripp remarks (1972:235), co-occurrence rules are especially strict in formal styles of discourse, "because of the seriousness of such situations."

2.3. (concerning situation) Invoking positional identities. The third aspect of formality involves the social identities of participants. It concerns which social identity (or identities), of the many that an individual might have, is invoked on a particular kind of occasion. Formal occasions invoke positional and public, rather than personal, identities (to use terms proposed by Mead (1937) and applied to speech events by Hymes (1972)). Public, positional identities are part of a structured set, widely recognized in a society (that is, it is widely recognized that the set of identities exists and that persons X, Y, and Z have them), and likely to be labeled. Personal identities, on the other hand, are individualized and depend more on the particular history of an individual's interactions. They are less likely, perhaps, to be labeled, and less likely to be common knowledge in the community at large.

This aspect of formality is involved in what many authors have interpreted

as the formal event's emphasis on social distance (as opposed to intimacy), and respect (for an established order of social positions and identities). For example, Albert (1972), writing on the Burundi, distinguishes two speech events that she calls formal and informal visiting. Formal visiting requires an open acknowledgement of differences in social rank, and usually occurs between persons whose positions are clearly ranked in a publicly known, apparently indisputable sense (such as feudal lord and vassal). Formal visiting is characterized by other aspects of "formality" as well: special structuring and planning of the discourse; use of formulas; special stance; and "seriousness" (which I take to imply some constraints on topic, intonation, facial expressions, and gestures; and consistency of these with social rank).

Because positional identities and formal (structured) discourse go together in the above example, one might conclude that this type of social identity is necessarily invoked by the structuring of discourse and need not be considered an independent variable. But another part of Albert's description mitigates against that conclusion. Here Albert discusses a speech event she calls "semiformalized quarreling," a "symbolic fight" between persons who represent the bride's and groom's families at a wedding. It seems that the major factor contrasting "semiformalized quarreling" with other (unformalized) quarreling is that the identities of participants are positional rather than personal. True, we are not really given enough information to know whether there are also differences in the organization of discourse in these two kinds of quarrels. But Albert's statement that there is always a great danger that the symbolic fight might become a real fight suggests that the major difference between them lies less in the organization of the discourse than in whether it applies to personal identities.

Of course, societies can be compared as to what social identities are

structured in this positional (or formal) sense; and within a society, one can compare speech events as to which positional sets are invoked, and the scope of the social relations organized in them. For instance, among the Wolof kinship positions, though publicly known, organize relations among a smaller group of persons than do society-wide identities like caste. Person X is patrilateral cross-cousin to only a certain group of people, and that identity is relevant only to his interaction with them; whereas his caste identity is relevant to his interaction with everyone. Whether the identities invoked in a Wolof speech event are society-wide or not has consequences for other aspects of the discourse. It is convenient to say that the wider, or more public, the scope of the social identities invoked on a particular occasion, the more "formal" the occasion is.

2.4. (concerning situation) Emergence of a focus. The fourth aspect of "formality" concerns the ways in which a main focus of attention is differentiated from side sequences and subsidiary interactions.[2] This is what makes the difference between a focused and an unfocused gathering. The emergence of a focus of attention in this sense is one aspect of "formality," and it parallels the process of focusing mentioned above for aspects of code (2.1.). Participation in the central, focal speech activity is regulated and structured in special ways. In particular, certain persons will have the right to speak in the main sequence, others only in the side sequences. In addition, the main sequence is governed by constraints on topic, continuity, and relevance, which do not apply (or not to the same extent) in the side sequences (cf. Ervin-Tripp 1972:243).

As an illustration, we can see this focusing at work in the organization of events at a Wolof naming-day ceremony. Much of the ceremony involves unfocused participation: the guests sit about in small groups, chatting and

eating. At various points, however, a griot (praise-singer) will start shouting bits of praise-poems, in an effort to capture the attention of the crowd and establish a focus of attention for his performance. If he succeeds, the situation changes character, altering the patterns of movement and talk for all participants, and bringing caste identities (rather than more personal relations) into the foreground.

Similarly, David Turton (1975), writing on the Mursi of southern Ethiopia, distinguishes among three kinds of political speech events according to criteria that seem to resemble this dimension of focused participation. Turton calls the difference between "chatting," "discussion," and "debate" a difference in "degree of formality"; what the more formal events entail is a process of setting off a single central (on-stage) speaker from his audience, by spatial arrangements and verbal cues. Only men of certain age-grades may speak in the main (focal) sequence, other persons being relegated to the audience or to side sequences.[3]

3.0. Role of these variables in cross-cultural comparison

I have suggested that these four aspects of formality probably apply universally -- that all speech communities will have events that show different degrees of "formality" according to each of these criteria, or combinations of these criteria. These aspects of formality are useful for comparing speech events within a given sociocultural system, as the previous examples are meant to illustrate. But how might communities differ, with respect to formality and informality in speech events? For cross-cultural comparison we need to see both the similarities and the differences among societies, in some systematic fashion. Using the definitions of formality here proposed, we can say that speech communities may differ (a) in the specific details of each variable or aspect of formality (e.g., what social identities are available,

or precisely which linguistic phenomena are subject to additional structuring); (b) in the ways the four aspects of formality combine or are interdependent; (c) in additional factors that correlate with formality in a given community (that is, when formality in one or all aspects is greatest, what other characteristics will the speech event display, in that speech community?).

To show how such differences might work and what kinds of factors might explain them, I shall compare two societies in more detail, the Wolof and the Mursi (from Turton 1975). Both these African societies have special speech events concerned with politics, and some of the events are more formal than others; these are the speech events to be examined here. In other respects the two societies are quite different. The Wolof have a large-scale, complex organization of castes and centralized political authority, with a strong emphasis on social rank and inequality. The Mursi are a small-scale society, with an acephalous political system, and recognizing no fundamental differences in rank other than those based on sex and age.

4.0. Wolof and Mursi political speech events

Both the Wolof and the Mursi distinguish more formal political "discussions" or "meetings" (methe in Mursi, ndaje in Wolof)[4] from casual "chat" about political topics. The more formal events contrast with the chats in all four of the ways we have been discussing:

4.1. First, the more formal events show increased structuring, both in spatial arrangements and in the discourse. Spatially, the Wolof participants are arranged according to rank; within this arrangement the speaker in the focal sequence stands (near the center) while others sit (or stand around the sidelines). The Mursi participants are spatially arranged by age-grades, with the focal speaker standing separately and pacing back and forth. In the

discourse, in both societies each speaker opens with conventional phrases. Among the Wolof there are also conventional interjections by griots in the audience, and sometimes special repetitions by griots acting as spokesmen for high-caste speakers.

The more formal events also show greater consistency, in the selection among alternative forms in all communicative modes. Among the Wolof, a speaker's movements, gestures, intonation, amount of repetition, and degree of syntactic elaboration, are all consistent with his social rank, particularly his caste (and so will differ according to whether he is a griot or a noble, for instance) -- whereas in informal chatting he might vary one or more of these modes for special purposes. Among the Mursi, though Turton gives us few details, it appears that the successful speaker is one who performs in a manner fully consistent with the social image of a wise elder. His movements should be forceful, but he should not show "excitement," repetitiousness, or "unintelligible" enunciation -- from which I infer that there are co-occurring constraints on gesture and facial expression, intonation, rapidity of speech, choice of phonological variants, and the organization of his discourse.

In the more formal events in both societies there is a single, main focal sequence, in which participation is specially regulated: only certain persons really have the right to speak "on stage," and this right has to do with their publicly-recognized social identities. Among the Mursi, these (positional) identities involve sex and membership in particular age-grades; among the Wolof, they involve generation, caste, and tenure of labeled political offices.

4.2. There are, however, some clear differences between the Wolof and the Mursi formal meetings, differences that concern the organization and nature of participation among those persons who have the right to speak on-stage. One difference lies in the regulation of turn-taking. In Wolof meetings turn-

taking is relatively highly structured: the order of speakers may be announced at the beginning, or there may be a person who acts as a sort of master of ceremonies. That is, there is usually one person who has the right to control the order of speakers in the focal sequence. In Mursi meetings, however, speakers compete for turns, and interruptions are frequent. A speaker may not be able to finish what he wants to say before the audience or another speaker interrupts him.

Another contrast concerns the nature of the speaking roles themselves. Among the Wolof, the more formal a speech event is (according to any of the four criteria, and whether the event is explicitly concerned with politics or not), the more likely it is that speaking roles will divide into complementary sets, associated with high and low social rank. That is, even among those who participate in the main sequence of discourse, participation is differentiated into two asymmetrical roles. All levels of linguistic organization show this differentiation. There will always be some participants who speak louder, at higher pitch, with more repetitive and more emphatic constructions (usages which connote low social rank); while other participants speak more softly, at lower pitch, with fewer emphatic constructions, and so on (usages which connote high social rank). This asymmetry of speaking roles is always a concomitant of formality in Wolof speech events. But I call it a concomitant because one would not want to say it is part of a <u>definition</u> of formality that might apply cross-culturally -- since the Mursi speaking roles, for instance, seem to be more symmetrical. Among the Mursi there is no structured difference among speaking roles at political events. Even the behavorial differences between speaker and audience are fewer than among the Wolof, because the Mursi audience can interrupt and interject loud comments in a way that the Wolof audience would not.

What aspects of social or political organization, which (as we have noted) are quite different for the two peoples, might be reflected in the differing organization of their formal speech events? One possible explanation for the Wolof asymmetry of speaking roles is that Wolof society shows a greater degree of role differentiation altogether. But this is not a sufficient explanation for a contrast in speech event organization that is qualitative, not quantitative (asymmetry vs. symmetry, not really as a matter of degree). Rather, I think the explanation lies in the Wolof preoccupation with rank and hierarchy, as opposed to the Mursi outlook which is more egalitarian, sex and age being the only structured inequalities. The rural Wolof view society as composed of complementary, unequal ranks where the upper has a natural right to command the lower.[5] Political decisions are culturally seen as initiated and decreed from above, by a recognized leader; the role of followers is only to advise and consent.

As a result, Wolof (village) political meetings are not convened for the purpose of decision-making, but for announcing decisions made from above, and answering questions about them. The complementarity of ranks is the source of the asymmetrical speaking roles; the centralization and autocracy of political authority is the source of the master of ceremonies' right to determine the order of speakers. There is no competition among speakers for the opportunity to express an opinion, since the expression of opinions and counter-arguments is not the purpose of the meeting. Among the Wolof the expression of opinion and the exercise of debate go on in private, as does the leader's decision-making process.

Mursi political meetings, in contrast, are convened for the express purpose of decision-making, by consensus, about future collective action. Each man of sufficient age has an equal right to participate in the consensus and

to try to influence what consensus will be reached.

From the differences between Wolof and Mursi formal political meetings, however, it does not follow that political decision-making is actually despotic among the Wolof and democratic among the Mursi. Wolof leaders need consensus support for their decisions, or else their followers may fail to cooperate, or may abandon them for another leader. Conversely, for the Mursi Turton notes that the decisions arrived at in formal meetings are sometimes such foregone conclusions as not really to have been reached during the course of the meeting at all. Possibly, private lobbying is as much a factor in some Mursi decisions as it is for the Wolof.

That is, the differences between Wolof and Mursi formal political meetings do not reflect differences in the actual political process so much as they reflect contrasts between what can be shown on-stage and what happens off-stage. Formality has to do with what can be publicly focused upon -- and it is in this sense that formality can often connote a social order, or forms of social action, that are publicly recognized and considered legitimate (regardless of whether political power actually operates through that public, formal social order or not).

This point has some resemblence to Bloch's (1975) claim that formality of discourse tends to reinforce a normative order and a political establishment. But whereas Bloch argues that formality restricts creativity, I would suggest rather that it focuses creativity. And I would also point out that since formality is a complex of interrelated variables rather than a single continuum, not all aspects of "formalization" necessarily concern the public social order. The structured discourse of poetry, for instance, does not automatically have a special relationship to the social establishment. Nor do the ways in which the discourse in poetry is structured necessarily have

to be traditional ways. If formality in speech events reflects, and in that sense supports, a traditional social system it is the other aspects of formality that do so, not the structuring of discourse in itself.

5.0. Summary

In sum: I have argued that formality and informality represent not poles on a one-dimensional continuum, but a complex of interrelated factors concerning many facets of a speech event. Four aspects of "formality" can be tentatively distinguished, which seem to apply to all societies -- that is, all societies seem to make distinctions among speech events according to these criteria, and to have speech events that are behaviorally more formal and less formal in these various senses of the term. These aspects of "formality" provide a possible framework for comparing speech events within a society; and in addition, societies can be usefully compared with each other according to how they connect the various aspects of formality, and what concomitant effects formalizing a speech event will have. Formality, in this view, is largely a process of focusing, which can operate along various dimensions. Where societies differ is in what they focus upon -- and what are the consequences of doing so.

FOOTNOTES

1. The Wolof data used in this paper come from my own fieldwork in Senegal during 1970-71 and 1975. The research was supported by the National Institutes of Health, the National Science Foundation, and Brandeis University. I am also grateful to the Institut Fondamental d'Afrique Noire, the Centre de Linguistique Appliquée de Dakar, and the Préfecture de Tivaouane for their hospitality and advice.

2. See also Jefferson 1972, who shows that this differentiation applies as well to casual conversation between two persons. When the number of participants becomes larger, however, the differentiation of a single main focus of attention for the whole group may or may not occur, and it is this process that is concerned here as an aspect of "formality."

3. And see Tyler's (1972) paper on the Koya of central India, where a number of behavorial differences, including lexical choices, differentiate central from peripheral actors in formal events.

4. Increasingly, the Wolof call these political meetings by the French term réunion.

5. I leave aside the relation of the priesthood, which ranks highest in a prestige and ritual sense, to political decision-making.

6. This paper was presented at the 1977 meetings of the American Anthropological Association, Houston, Texas.

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